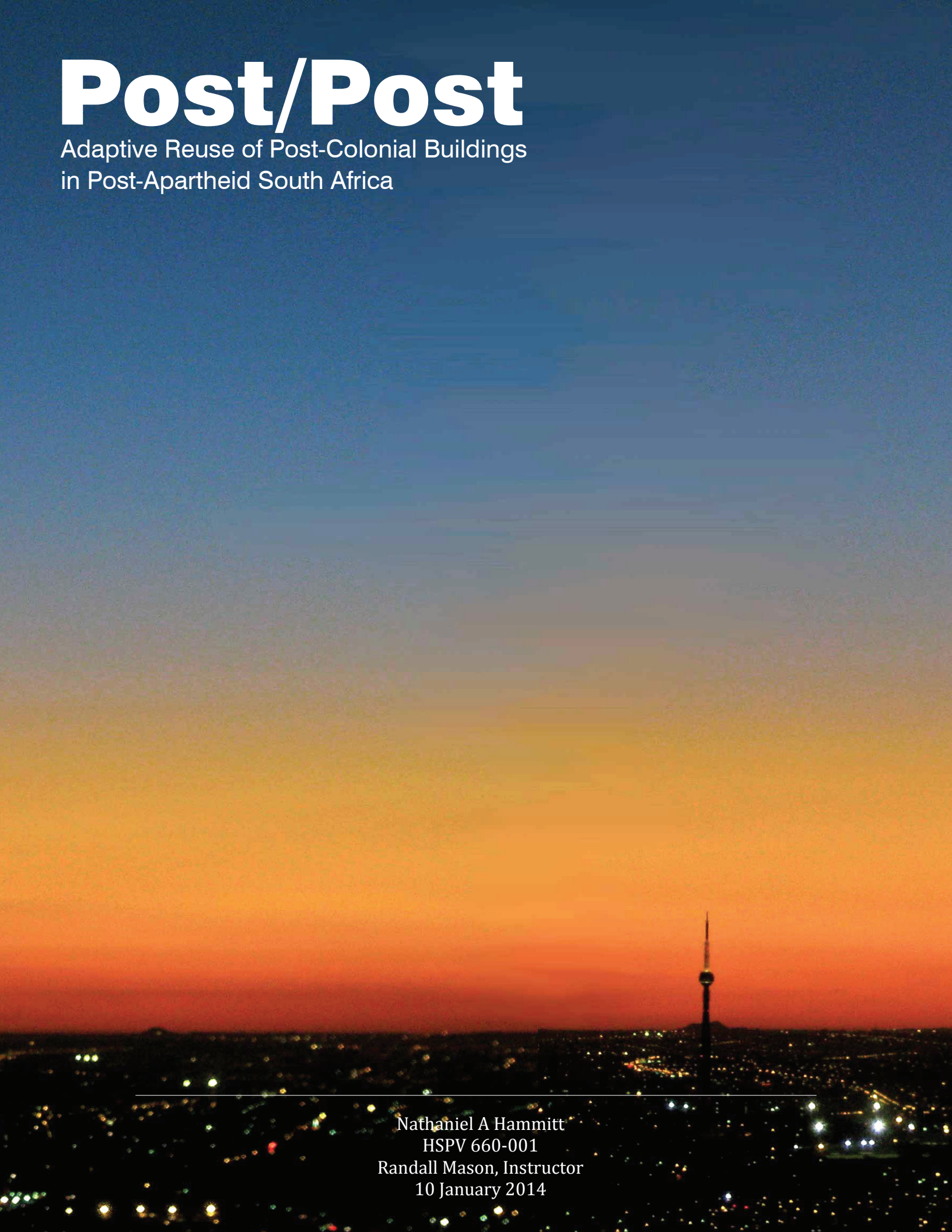
Post/Post

Adaptive Reuse of Post-Colonial Buildings in Post-Apartheid South Africa



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Terms

Post-Colonial:

For the sake of this paper, post-colonial is defined as the global era in which global colonial powers divested their colonial holdings and territories. As a local marker, South Africa's post-colonial era began formally on 31 May 1961, the day on which the People of South Africa gained independence from the United Kingdom with the dissolution of the Union of South Africa and the formation of the Republic of South Africa. South African nationalist intentions existed long before this actual date, but it functions well as a watershed for the purposes of this paper.

Post-Apartheid

Apartheid is an Afrikaans word defined as 'the state of being apart'. The apartheid era of racial segregation was maintained by the National Party of South Africa's white-minority-rule government from 1948 to 1994. The current post-apartheid era began on 27 April 1994 with the election of Nelson Mandela, South Africa's first black president.

1. Atop Meintjieskop

"To reveal the unconscious of a city, we need to track the visible marks of the passage of time and the various lines of flight that symbolize the culture of a place"

–Achille Mbebe

Meet our first subject: two large sandstone Edwardian structures, each capped with a domed stone tower in the Cape Dutch style and linked with a small semi-circular Italian Renaissance style arcade. The East and West halves of this edifice stand in tension with each other; although each side of the building is a mirror image of the other their separateness hints that their architectural connectedness is contrived. The two halves seem bound together more out of programmatic necessity than any overpowering desire for togetherness. The building's presence, although bisected by a central courtyard, conveys a powerful air of political colonial purpose and directionality-- from the heights of Meintjieskop, the highest point in Pretoria, the building seems to boldly proclaim the rallying cry, 'Outward!' Our subject, although aged by a century of continual use, endures for the purposes it was originally intended: known simply as the Union Buildings, it houses the offices for the President of the Republic of South Africa.

Closely analyzing this work or architecture serves as a brief introductory exercise in spatial semiotics, revealing that the principles on which South African design is predicated— even at the highest levels— are often fraught with division and social separateness. When British architect Herbert Baker originally envisioned the Union Buildings in 1909, the two separate towers were meant to represent the two ruling classes of the country; the Afrikaners and the British. A third tower, never constructed, was to stand as a Temple of Peace alongside the connective arcade [figure 1].

In their separateness, each building alludes to a greater separateness physically manifest throughout the country— namely in South Africa's apartheid urban planning and governance policies enacted from 1948 to 1994— but also mentally and socially manifested in the vast inequality between the nation's rich and poor. The Union Buildings are one of many buildings and public spaces that still exist today unchanged from the time when South Africa was merely a colonial holding of the British Empire, and in an era of both

post-colonialism, and contemporary post-apartheid governance it falls to a young South African republic to wrestle with how best to use and re-use its existing building stock and urban plan paradigms in ways that exemplify the values of a young country seeking dignity, equality, and continued unification. Perhaps the best way to consider the stakes of this argument is with an awareness for the country's current political landscape and design culture. Known as the Rainbow Nation: South Africa's moniker alludes to the diversity of its people and history. Contemporary design and preservation is inherently linked to politics and place; keeping the turbulent and diverse history of the country in mind, this paper seeks to investigate the adaptation and the cultural context for reuse of historical urban buildings in post-apartheid South Africa.

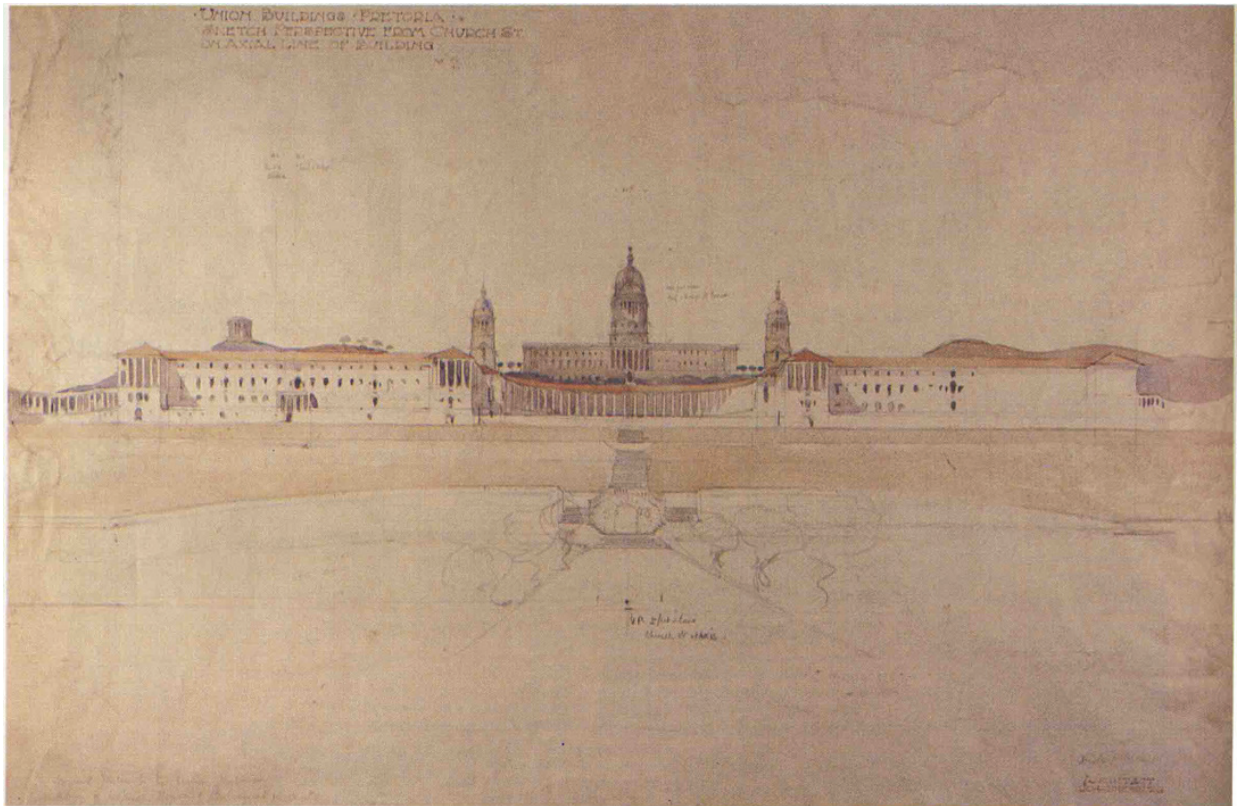

Figure 1

2. Leveling the Playing Field

"The strategic-political and ultimately moral-historical question is how to move toward understanding without ever forgetting, but to remember without constantly rekindling the divisive passions of the past. Such an approach is the only one which would allow us to look down into the darkness of the well of the atrocities of the past and to speculate on their causes at the same time as we haul up the waters of hope for a future of dignity and equality."

-Neville Alexander

Before pursuing any additional case studies, it is important to assess South Africa's current environment for architectural adaptive reuse and historic preservation. A political culture exists in favor of modifying history that was previously censored by apartheid in favor of a more democratic historical narrative. Pertaining to all matters of South African heritage, 'public history' should be distinguished from 'people's history'; a 'public history' approach popularizes knowledge about the past while the 'people's history' movement serves to democratize total knowledge. Public history, as it is commonly regarded in South Africa, "brings to light aspects of the past excluded in dominant or elitist history," while a people's history "defines instead the different processes through which knowledge about the past is introduced".

As South Africa has transformed from a country of elite history (heritage known only to the privileged upper class) to a country of popularized history (allowing past 'hidden' facts and heritage to be made known to everyone), there is a growing shift toward a normative public history by means of prescriptive people's history techniques. For instance, publicizing the political history of Robben Island and the events that transpired there has led to greater popular understanding and reconciliation between those who were oppressed and their oppressors.

At smaller scales, South African museums are beginning to share the stories of what happened during apartheid so as to popularize each individual's experiences, while democratizing South Africans' ability to gain access to this shared history as a whole. Public and people's history movements are excellent means of reconciling past differences, although more regrettable examples of modifying shared history also can be found in the changing of the physical landscape to purge unwanted facts from the public sphere. One

example is as follows: in the nineteen years since Mandela's African National Congress political party (ANC) gained control of the presidency there has been a concerted effort to remove the monuments and institutions erected to commemorate politicians and political actions of apartheid. Of the many 'erasures' conducted by the current post-apartheid government, the act of changing street names and statues originally christened in memory of Prime Minister H.F. Verwoerd provides an excellent example. PM Verwoerd's public presence has since been largely removed throughout the country in effect to erase all public memory of the politician on account of his actions implementing apartheid legislation. Other acts of name-changing are at a far greater scale, such as the current national government's efforts to rename the culturally Afrikaans city Pretoria to the more nationalistic Setswana name Tshwane.

These meta-narratives of the democratizing national government erasing unfortunate themes from South African history impact preservation movements around the country with an increased sense of hesitation to preserve or adapt any historic building that is tied too closely with the apartheid regime or its colonial forebears. Edwardian, Dutch, Victorian, and Cape Dutch architectural styles found throughout South Africa bear stylistic marks of the colonial presence the British and Dutch Empires throughout the country. In the decades prior to South Africa's 1961 independence, modern styles such as Art Deco, Art Moderne, and early modernism found their way into the apartheid vernacular most prominently in the 1949 Voortrekker Monument.

Unlike Eastern European peer monuments, whose dedication in commemoration of nationalistic pride is often followed just as surely by the monument's eventual neglect and/or demolition, the Voortrekker monument has survived intact to the present day, kept, even by the post-apartheid government, "as a reminder of the oppression of the apartheid era… to learn from the lessons of the past".

At an urban level, heritage conservation has a powerful bearing on the identity of white South Africans, and it is far more difficult to 'erase' artifacts of the urban fabric—especially if the artifact of the past is the urban fabric itself! Cities are, in essence, the "principal repository of white civilization in the country", and since apartheid times urban areas have largely been held at arm's length from black citizens (unless overwhelmed by sheer numbers and/or white flight). South Africans of Afrikaans or British descent have held majority stock in many South African urban areas. Although not in the majority by popu-

lation, the building stock and 'sacred' public spaces of Pretoria, Cape Town, Bloemfontein, and even Johannesburg are home to an incredible repository of culture, ergo white South African identity.

The extent to which white South Africans deny or exclude their affairs from colored, Indian, or black citizens (and vice versa) in urban environments seems emboldened by the urban spatial structure established by apartheid planning paradigms. The ways in which neighborhoods, buildings, thoroughfares, parks, malls, and commercial areas are arranged largely exacerbates cultural disconnects.

Pietermaritzburg, capital of the Natal province, is a case in point; although surrounded by residents of the KwaZulu homeland [figure 2], the architecture and spatial/social structure of Pietermaritzburg's urban core remains largely untouched and unchanged from its apartheid form. Described as a "charming Victorian city grafted onto Boer Voortrekker roots," Pietermaritzburg is "replete with an impressive heritage of British colonial associations and past military victories".

The stability and permanence of the buildings and spaces throughout the city give a false impression that the city is a bustling center of British-apartheid construct. Grand halls and monuments erected in the early 1900's still stand, as does the unspoken acknowledgement that blacks should not get too comfortable living within the city core. The specters of past white dominance still haunt the halls of civic and public buildings, and while these ghosts of apartheid past stand firmly rooted in the core of the city they seem to also stake a claim to the city on behalf of the White minority. For better or for worse Churchill's famous adage that "we shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us" may keep white South Africans from embracing the post-apartheid reality and reimagining historic structures in new ways, often simply because so little of the physical context has changed and that which remains bears too similar a resemblance to the structures of the old regime.

Will there be a turning point at which these historic buildings are demolished and the new national government erects new structures in their place? Or, hopefully more likely, will there emerge a new national spirit bold enough to stake claim and ownership over even the most connotative apartheid and colonialist structures, giving them a new identity and vision for the emerging Rainbow Nation?

3. Case Study: A Light on a Hill

"Rising from the ashes of that ghastly era, it will shine forth as a pledge for all time that South Africa will never return to that abyss. It will stand as an affirmation that South Africa is indeed a better place for all."

–Nelson Mandela

One exemplary landmark of how the South African built landscape has adapted from its colonial past into a post-apartheid present is in the Constitution Hill complex in downtown Johannesburg. Located two kilometers north of the Johannesburg CBD, Constitution Hill fills a void between the wealthy northwestern districts of Braamfontein and Sunnyside and the economically emergent Hillbrow neighborhood [figure 3].

Constitution Hill and its accompanying Constitutional Court (the supreme court of South Africa for cases challenging the nation's constitution) sits atop Number Four, an 'everyday urban prison' used from 1904 until 1983 by the city of Johannesburg in the detention of political dissidents and criminals. Number Four itself grew from the expansion of the Afrikaans Old Fort which was established in 1896 to protect the city from British incursions and to police what once was the small mining town of Johannesburg. Number Four was expanded in 1904 and 1928 to provide a women's jail and an 'awaiting trial block' for criminals before their trials. By the time of its closure in 1983 the facility had processed thousands of apartheid-era prisoners— these were the sorts of criminals you might find guilty in varying degrees: some for stealing, others for homicide or rape, but also those who had been convicted of the petty crime of disobeying apartheid-imposed group area laws and trespassing into city sectors designated for other ethnicities. In 1994, eleven years after Number Four's closure, when the country's Constitutional Court was formed and was in need of a building to host their affairs, the old awaiting trial block was suggested for adaptive reuse to be used as the new home of the Constitutional Court. This location seemed appropriate as one through which the mission of the Constitutional Court—to protect and preserve the long-abused human rights of South African people—could find physical realization.

By crystallizing heritage as a political process which is part of the national narrative for human rights in South Africa, Number Four was no longer a neutral or negative

space. Atrocities of the past which had been committed there could be revisited and re-envisioned in a positive light through a filter of redemption and reconciliation. Realizing that the urban prison was an immense repository of apartheid-era heritage, the preservation and adaptation brief proposed by the Constitutional Court challenged international design teams to propose a building that would re-use components of Number Four to create a new National Court.

In the end, it was not a foreign architecture firm whose vision was realized in the new facility, but rather the vision of a few recent university graduates. Their proposal to reuse the physical remains of the original 'awaiting trial block' and incorporate the old guard towers— each newly adorned with a glowing light mast— creates an open and democratized judicial experience [figure 4a].

Linking the past and the future, honoring the mission of the Constitutional Court and calling attention to its higher purpose by setting it in stark contrast with the prison and trial facilities of the past, the Constitution Hill complex is a beautiful example of adaptation at all levels. From the scale of one small brick taken from the old cell block and reused to demarcate the walls of the new court [figure 4b], to the scale of the entire region with Constitution Hill stitching together divided segments of the kaleidoscopic city, the past is honored and acknowledged while paving way for a brighter future.

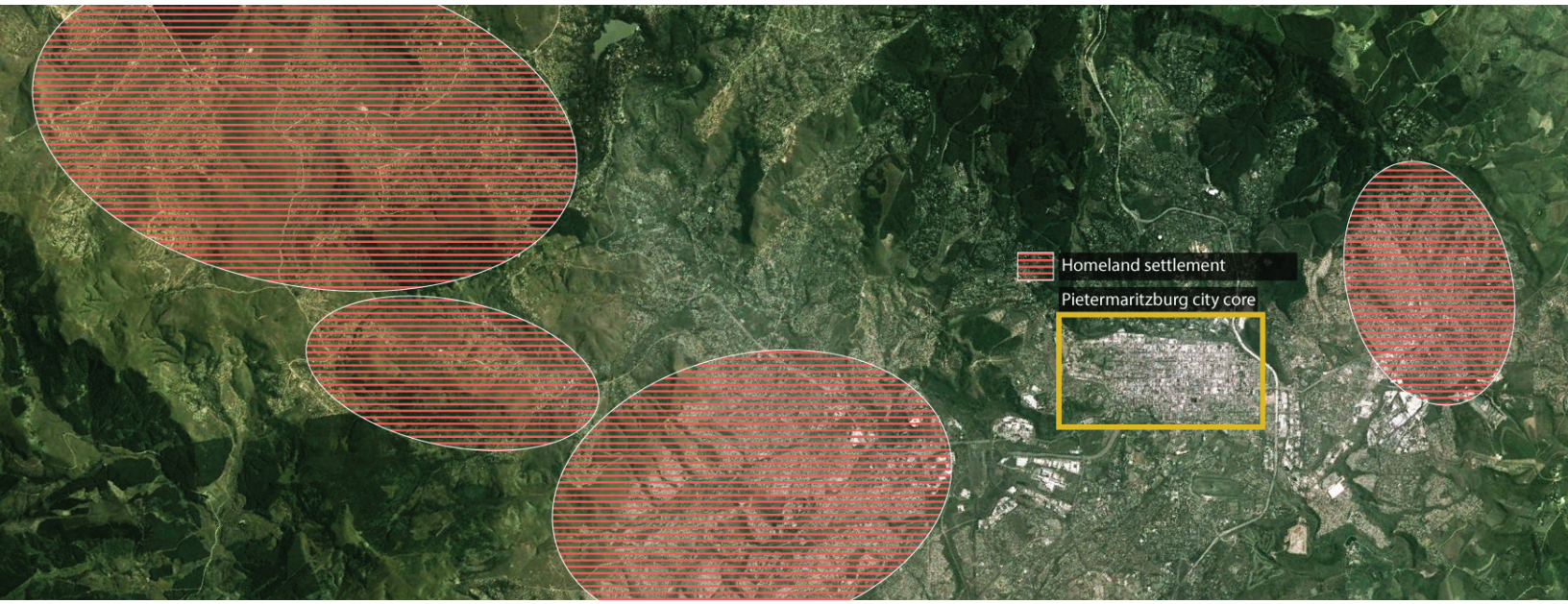

Figure 2

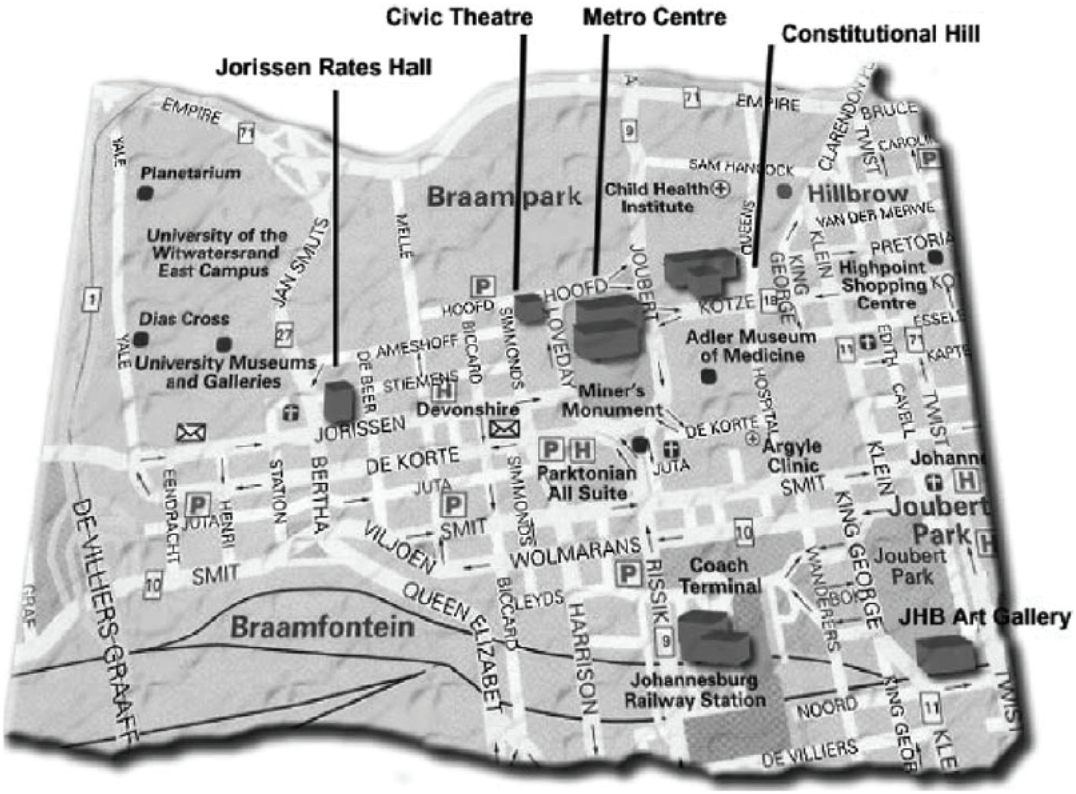

Figure 3

Figure 4a

4 Reuse and Gentrification

"It is said that Johannesburg has been built up and torn down no less than five times since it first appeared on the Highveld in 1886. And each time it has re-emerged even uglier than before."

– John Matshikiza

While the adaptive reuse of Constitution Hill has solid ethical foundations, it is critical to remember that when it comes to popular history and people's history, museums and heritage sites in South Africa "are not valued as much for what they are, as for what they can do", (emphasis added). Gevisser observes that the city 'supported [development of Constitution Hill] not so much because they believe in the power of heritage, but because they are interested in inner-city regeneration'. Financial backing for Constitution Hill was provided in part by the Johannesburg Development Authority (JDA) and Blue IQ (an economic development initiative of the Gauteng Provincial Government), two institutions with a vested interest in the economic and social prosperity that such a development would engender.

To consider heritage conservation and rehabilitation purely for economic gain is a dangerous game to play. In cities around the world inner city economic development has led to widespread gentrification as new development closes a value gap and displaces existing residents into surrounding lower-class neighborhoods. From 1992 through the mid 2000's tenants and landlords evacuated their inner city Johannesburg properties in favor of northern suburbs, mainly due to fear of black uprising and already heavy crime rates. A notable relocation came in 2000 when the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (now the JSE Securities Exchange) moved from its Hollard Street location in inner-city Marshalltown to the booming northern suburb of Sandton.

While northern-oriented white flight characterized the first years of the new millennium in Johannesburg, the renewed interest in the city core propelled by the FIFA World cup in 2010 a number of historic properties have seen critical reinvestment and their halo effects are beginning to be felt in the residential and artistic community throughout the inner city core. One such project, the Barbican Building, had seen a number of adaptations before it was overrun by homeless squatters in the late 90's. Originally the tallest building in the

city in 1930 at the time of its completion, the Barbican was used over the next 70 years for everything from workshops to studio spaces, fashion stores to automobile showrooms. Beginning in 1994 the building sat dormant and suffered intense destruction-by-neglect at the hand of its absentee and laissez-faire landowner (Old Mutual Bank), but in 2009 the bank realized it could make a profit on its land due to generally improved neighborhood conditions. By 2012 the Barbican had been rehabilitated into a mixed-use office space and high-end residential complex.

While this night-to-day transformation from a slum to a trendy loft is indicative of the rapid gentrification taking place throughout much of inner-city Johannesburg, and while it is a substantial win for the preservation community to experience these sort of adaptations taking place, there are still many battles to fight. In an effort to adapt historic apartheid and colonial-era structures into a new democratic metropolitan milieu, it is important to remember that the spatial structure of every colonial-era city is tainted with a bias of racial separateness. South Africans of all colors need to dig deep into their collective past to determine the purposes of their existing buildings and to investigate how they can be best used to heal the wounds of the past and lay a firm foundation for the future.

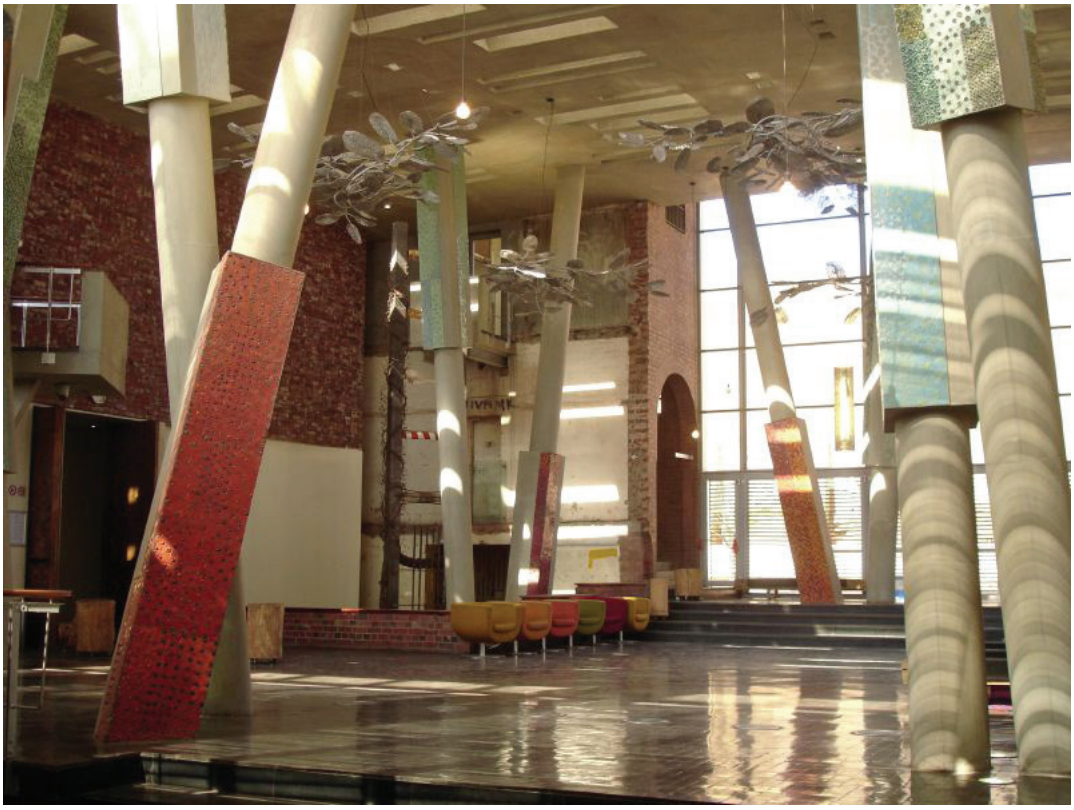

Figure 4b

6. Meintjieskop Revisited

"There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered." –Nelson Mandela

Planners, designers, and developers shape our physical environments, this much cannot be disputed. Their machinations give us a framework to know who does what, where. Our actions and motivations (the why) can be shaped by the existing physical context (spaces established by others), but they can also counteract these forces by (re) shaping physical context and its perception by the general public. Any pre-1994 building in South Africa will be seen for their ties to apartheid, but it is the way individuals act in these post-apartheid spaces that redefines how the country and its citizens view themselves and their role in shaping the nation. In closing, it is worth revisiting our original subject: The Union Buildings. Although they were seen for over 80 years as pure and unswerving relics of colonialism and apartheid, it was not until Nelson Mandela took his oath of office in the amphitheater between the two buildings that they began to embody a new form of union– that between the political powers of the past and present desire for racial and cultural reconciliation. It is in this continued quest for spatial union and adaptation that South Africa will find sure footing for the future.

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